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FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONSUMERS ADVISED OF RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH RAW SPROUTS

Because of reports of increasing numbers of illnesses associated with consumption of raw sprouts, the Food and Drug Administration is advising all persons to be aware of the risks associated with eating raw sprouts (e.g., alfalfa, clover, radish). Outbreaks have included persons of both genders and all age categories. Those persons who wish to reduce the risk of foodborne illness from sprouts are advised not to eat raw sprouts. This advice is particularly important for children, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems, all of whom are at high risk of developing serious illness due to foodborne disease. People in high risk categories should not eat raw sprouts.

This advisory is updated from a previous health advisory issued August 31, 1998, and is based on additional information from clover and alfalfa sprout-associated salmonellosis outbreaks from January through May 1999. Two outbreaks were associated with clover sprouts: one occurred in California in May and involved approximately 30 cases; a second outbreak in Colorado from March through May involved approximately 70 cases. In addition, from January through March an outbreak of salmonellosis affecting approximately 85 people occurred in Oregon, Washington, and California and was associated with the consumption of alfalfa sprouts.

Since 1995, raw sprouts have emerged as a recognized source of foodborne illness in the United States. These illnesses have involved the pathogenic bacteria *Salmonella* and *E. coli* O157. Alfalfa and clover sprouts have been involved most often, but all raw sprouts may pose a risk.

The sprout industry has been working in cooperation with government, academia, and other industry segments to enhance the safety of its product. These efforts have focused primarily on seed treatment strategies, good manufacturing practices, and sanitation.

"Despite all these efforts to make raw sprouts safer, we continue to receive reports of illnesses associated with raw sprouts. Consumers need to understand that, at this time, the best way to control this risk is not to eat raw sprouts," said Jane E. Henney, MD, FDA Commissioner.

Although infections with *Salmonella* and *E. coli* O157 can cause serious illness, the illness is generally self-limiting in most healthy adults. However, an *E. coli* O157 infection can lead to hemolytic uremic syndrome with resultant kidney failure or death in children, and equally serious complications in the elderly. *Salmonella* infections can cause serious illness in children, the elderly and the immune compromised. Healthy persons infected with these bacteria experience diarrhea, nausea, abdominal cramping and fever for several days.

FDA offers the following advice to all consumers concerning sprouts:

- Cook sprouts. This significantly reduces the risk of illness.
- Check sandwiches and salads purchased at restaurants and delicatessens. These entrées often contain raw sprouts. Consumers who wish to reduce their risk of foodborne illness should specifically request that raw sprouts not be added to their food.
- Sprouts grown in the home also present a risk if eaten raw. Many outbreaks have been attributed to contaminated seed. If pathogenic bacteria are present in or on seed, they can grow to high levels during sprouting even under clean conditions.

FDA will closely monitor the safety of sprouts and will take further actions, including the establishment of preventive controls, as necessary to protect consumers.

Consumers who have eaten raw sprouts and are experiencing diarrhea or other symptoms of foodborne infections are advised to consult their health care providers.

For further information, see "Fact Sheet for Sprouts Advisory" below.

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Fact Sheet for Sprouts Advisory

The Food and Drug Administration has issued an updated health advisory to make all persons aware of the risks associated with the consumption of raw sprouts (e.g. alfalfa, clover, radish). A previous advisory on this subject was issued August 31, 1998. FDA advises that persons who wish to reduce the risk of foodborne illness should not eat or consume raw sprouts. The advice against consumption is particularly important for persons at high risk of developing serious illness due to foodborne disease (i.e., children, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems).

Recent outbreaks include:

- May 1999, approximately 30 cases of salmonellosis associated with the consumption of clover sprouts in California.
- March-May, 1999, approximately 70 cases of salmonellosis associated with the consumption of clover sprouts in Colorado.
- January-March 1999, approximately 85 cases of salmonellosis associated with the consumption of alfalfa sprouts in Oregon, Washington, and California.
- July 1998, 8 cases of illness attributed to E. coli O157 infection associated with the consumption of alfalfa/clover sprouts in California and Nevada.
- May 1998, 18 cases of salmonellosis associated with the consumption of alfalfa sprouts in California.
- Late 1997-July 1998, 60 cases of salmonellosis associated with the consumption of an alfalfa/clover sprout mixture in California.

FDA has planned immediate preventive measures as follows:

- FDA will issue national guidance to the industry based on a more thorough review of the recommendations made in a 1999 report of the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods. This guidance will focus on microbial testing, sanitation, seed quality as well as seed treatment strategies with appropriate performance standards.
- FDA will send investigators to sprout facilities to test water used to grow sprouts (spent irrigation water which is a good measure of microbial contamination) for Salmonella and E. coli O157. FDA will also increase surveillance of sprouting facilities and monitor the

extent of industry adoption of enhanced production practices as recommended in the FDA guidance.

FDA will closely monitor the safety of sprouts and will take further actions, including preventive controls, as necessary to protect consumers.

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